

OUR PROPOSED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

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(Speech delivered by Mr. A. Perles of the Joint-Action Committee of New York at the convention of the National Federation of the Blind held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 8 and 9, 1941)

It may be slightly anachronistic to talk of remunerative employment for blind people in times when many people with all their faculties are hard put to it to obtain work of any kind. Many feel that these are the days to think solely of greater social security grants and ultimate federal pensions. In their view the great depression from which the nation has not fully recovered, and the mass displacement of workers through increased mechanization of industry, have together relegated all thought of profitable employment for blind people to the realm of idle and absurd fantasy.

If any defense is required for broaching this subject, it lies in the following considerations. In the first place, after all else has been said, the performance of useful work for decent reward remains the desired goal of everyone whether or not he possesses normal vision. The blind man, too, if he is normal in all other respects, dreams of earning a good living. And like others he tries desperately to avoid slaving for a pittance. In the second place, no thoughtful blind person looks upon social security grants or pensions as a final solution to his difficulties. There are forms of aid made necessary by the gross inadequacies inherent in our present economic order, and their achievement still remains our most pressing task. Blind assistance and pensions serve a twofold purpose. They make decent provision assuming, of course, that they are reasonably adequate, for those who, in addition to blindness, labor under infirmities of age or other physical disabilities which make them totally unfit for productive work. These forms of aid also serve to keep from want and destitution those able to work during times when society appears incapable of affording them opportunity to earn a decent living. For this latter group of blind people, remunerative employment is always the desired goal, and for this, if for no other reason, it becomes the duty of a movement such as the National Federation of the Blind to address itself to the task of working out an employment program.

In the third place, it is not true that the field of profitable employment is completely closed to blind people. The WPA, the enormous volume of defense industry, and the vast new social program which must succeed this present emergency, constitute three possible avenues through which blind people may eventually secure useful work with decent rewards. Others, no doubt, exist. We must discover and utilize them all.

Fourthly, the inclusion of an employment plank in our program contributes much to winning public sympathy and respect for our cause. We may elicit pity, we shall most certainly arouse opposition, by harping exclusively upon the subject of aid and pension, but we shall most assuredly secure an intelligent public appreciation of our needs, when we come before society with a well-rounded program in which the

necessity both of pensions and of remunerative employment is clearly demonstrated.

And finally, this subject needs to be discussed, for it is becoming increasingly minifest, that before further progress can be made towards a solution of our employment difficulties our attitude and standards in this field will have to undergo complete revamping.. We shall, as in other phases of our work, be compelled to substitute a national for a local perspective. We shall have to re-examine the whole question of employability of the blind, and, perhaps, develop new criteria by which to judge of their fitness to perform useful work. We shall have to ascertain whether or not blind people's capacity is limited to a few standard occupations such as, chair caning, broom and mop making, piano tuning and music, and news dealing. In short, we shall have to ask ourselves the question, "Is the blind man a producer or a permanent dependent?"

It seems presumptuous for me to elaborate upon the blind employment situation before a group so thoroughly conversant with our common problems. Yet I am compelled to undertake this task, (in brief, of course) in order to prepare the ground for the concrete remedial suggestions which follow.

The problem of employment of the blind in our country is met today in the haphazard, localistic, pinchpenny manner typical of most phases of most work for the blind. The task of providing work is left for the most part, to local private agencies whose dependence upon public contributions for a lack of facilities with which to perform this function. The results are indeed pathetically meager: A number of widely scattered sheltered workshops poorly managed, poorly equipped, poorly staffed, burdened with a huge overhead cost, and, worst of all, yielding the unfortunate blind worker long hours of hard toil with scant financial reward; placement services which place few people, but which make a good impression on prospective donors sonorous talk. There is little or no effort anywhere to investigate new possibilities of employment. Consequently the luckless applicant for a job has nothing to choose from save a few traditionally "blind" occupations for none of which he may be fitted by background, by training, or by temperment. In my view, we possess little or no accurate knowledge of the many types of work suited to blind people in general. or of the varying skills among blind people in particular. We too often make the mistake, (in action, if not in words) of classifying all blind people either as shop workers, tuners, musicians, news dealers, or beggars. Are there not other types of work whose inclusion in the list of job opportunities would greatly increase the number of profitable employed blind people? I strongly suspect there are. In any case, the discovery of an answer to this question is one of our first tasks in this field of work. We cannot expect to get it from a number of unco-ordinated local agencies, who use employment merely as a piece of bait to lure contributions from the public, for whom employment is but one of a number of unrelated items of service, who, in short extend themselves too thinly over too large and varied area of activity. Indeed, I will state catagorically that this patchwork

setup of private philanthropic agencies is not and cannot be properly equipped to provide profitable employment for the blind. And they have, for reasons of self-interest, rendered a great disservice to the blind by frequently making the statement that they are equipped to handle the blind man employment along with his other problems. This is emphatically not true, and when the public is made fully to understand that there exists a woeful lack of facilities here as in so many other phases of work for the blind, we shall have taken a long step towards clearing away the difficulties now hampering the solution of our employment problem.

Frequently in the course of this discussion, I have used the phrase "remunerative employment". This calls for definition. For, an understanding of this term brings with it an important clue to the concrete standards which we must follow in this field of our activity. When I speak of remunerative employment, I imply a condition wherein the blind man's work is an integral part of the economic order, not a special therapeutic project, and in which the reward of effort is equal to that reaped by sighted people doing the same work, and not based upon what we may call the blindness differential. If the blind man has a job on a government project, his must be equal to that of his sighted fellow-workers. Happily, this is the case today. If he secures work in the assembling department of a factory, or in an office putting letters in envelopes, wherever he happens to be employed, merit of performance must be the sole criterion of reward. Blindness must at all times be left out of account when computing wages or salaries. Blind peoples' work, whether conducted alongside sighted people, or carried on in a locale especially designated for them, but must contain at least a profit potential. Its product must be taken by the public solely on intrinsic worth, not artificially foisted upon society in the name of charity or occupational therapy. Useful work for a decent reward, aside from its moral value, possesses a practical advantage in increased material returns, which do not fluctuate with people's ability or willingness to play at philanthropy. These are norms whose complete attainment must obviously consume a long period of time. Perhaps they may be fully achieved. But at present they function as guides, as shapers of policy.

Sheltered industries fulfill none of these criteria of remunerative employment. Their work is often quite unrelated to the main economic stream. Their wages are low and unstable by reason of their necessarily high overhead cost and their policy of permanent deficits. Their sales policy is nothing more than an appeal to public philanthropy. You have but to look at the label, "Made by the blind", to convince yourselves of this. Blindness differential is their basic standard of reward.

With our standards of remunerative employment thus set, we can proceed to a consideration of suggestions whereby the present deplorable situation may be remedied. I look for a solution of our employment difficulties to the creation of a three-way partnership among the blind people themselves, through an organization such as yours, the federal government, and the general public. Our part in this

collaboration is the primary one. We must first make a thorough study of the situation, as regards existing employment conditions, new occupations in which blind people can engage, and the general question of the employability of the blind. Upon this last point we need much additional information. Indeed, I believe that our whole concept of employability will require revision. As it stands today, it condemns more than half our people to permanent idleness and resulting dependence. The discovery of new types of work will, I hope, have the effect of materially reducing the present high figure of unemployability among the blind.

On the basis of these general surveys, we will make concrete proposals for enlarging remunerative opportunities for the blind. It is at this point that our two partners, the government and the public, enter the picture. For, when we have armed ourselves with carefully thought out employment plans, well buttressed by supporting data, we shall be in a position to launch our campaign to secure the support of the government and the public.

I may say that the national government will play an increasingly important role in this program. For, one of the most practicable ways, to increase remunerative opportunities for blind people is to place more of them either on existing government projects, or on those contemplated in the future. The WPA has given us tentative beginnings in this direction; but we, and particularly agencies for the blind missed a magnificent opportunity to render a permanent service, when we failed at the outset of the WPA program to attempt the securing of more jobs for our people in the projects, and when we did not make the effort to obtain a guarantee of permanent tenure for those blind people who were already on the projects. We might have achieved this and more, namely the establishment of special projects for the blind, had we and the agencies convinced the government of the existing lack of employment facilities. We shall have to make up for this remissness. The government can serve us not only by adding more blind people to its existing projects, but also by aiding with subsidies in the creation of new industrial establishments for our people. Our campaign will also seek, wherever possible, to win the cooperation of private employers. We must attempt to convince them, not only by word, but also by frequent practical demonstrations, that blind people can perform many jobs from which society's ignorance now bars them. The general public must be brought to support all phases of this program, so that at no stage, shall we be hampered by opposition borne of misunderstanding. And we shall have to take constant care that the wages and salaries paid blind people do not fall below the levels enjoyed by others in the community. In general, our aim in this field is the abolition of the deficiency economy under which the blind now subsist, and the substitution of an economy of increasing plenty.

This is a broad outline of the work assigned to the employment commission proposed in our committee's resolution which Dr. tenBroek had the kindness to introduce into this convention. The twofold nature of its functions--finding the facts and publicizing them--is

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The second part of the report deals with the economic situation of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's economic development. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's economic development.

The third part of the report deals with the social situation of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's social development. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's social development.

The fourth part of the report deals with the political situation of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's political development. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's political development.

The fifth part of the report deals with the cultural situation of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's cultural development. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's cultural development.

The sixth part of the report deals with the future of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's future. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's future.

indicated in the resolution; the manner in which they will be performed will depend upon those selected to man the commission.

If you adopt this resolution, you will set the blind people's feet upon a new road whose end will be a useful and fruitful life as respected members of their communities. You will, it is true, take upon yourselves a burden of arduous toil and harassment. For your efforts will meet with the formidable and determined opposition of those who are now entrenched in power over the blind, and who therefore resent any innovation not of their own making. But yours is an organization, yours a leadership, undaunted by opposition however powerful it may be. Yours, indeed, is the only organization qualified by general rank and file composition, by basic philosophy and by leadership, to undertake this vast new employment problem. Let nothing deter us from this task, not even the oft-repeated objection that this time of national emergency is not appropriate for launching campaigns for new social programs. Quite the contrary, this vast construction social program must be firmly laid. We must accustom the public mind to accept our proposals when conditions become propitious for their realization in action. And, as I have already said, our program can be integrated with the nation's defense effort.

The blind people are looking to this convention and to this organization for new ideas and policies. They long for active, honest, and courageous leadership. You have it in your power to kindle new faith and enthusiasm of all blind people throughout the nation. The addition of this new employment policy to your excellent program will do much to answer their need. I know, I am convinced, you will not fail them.

The resolution presented by the Joint Action Committee of New York contained a proposal that the National Federation of the Blind should establish an employment commission which would be divided into two sections: One to collect the facts by means of a general survey of employment opportunities for the blind; the other to be a public relations commission whose general task would be to make contacts with the appropriate government officials and private employers and whose objective would be the securing of greater employment possibilities for blind people.

What is your reaction to this proposal? Do you have any constructive ideas as to methods for improving the employment situation of the blind? You are earnestly urged to communicate your suggestions to Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, Illinois.

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